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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000147

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: POLICE OPEN FIRE AT OPPOSITION POLITICAL RALLY;
TWO INJURED

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) At a February 22 political rally of the opposition Mgwirizano Coalition, police fired on the crowd, injuring two people. The rally, which the police claimed could not take place because the President was holding his own rally in the vicinity, resumed later after Coalition leaders obtained a court injunction. The two victims have reportedly been treated and released from the hospital, and no AmCits are known to have been injured. Shenanigans with rally permits and the police's heavy-handed crowd control methods appear to be part of a pattern of UDF attempts to undermine and prevent opposition parties from holding public meetings. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Kholiwe Mkandawire, Spokesperson for the Coalition, told polfsn that the Coalition had requested and received permission to hold a rally at Njamba Freedom Park in Blantyre on February 22. However, just before the rally was to begin, the police delivered a handwritten letter from the Blantyre City Assembly Chief Executive barring the rally from taking place. According to Mkandawire, the letter said the rally had to be canceled because the President was holding a ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) rally 7 kilometers away from Njamba Freedom Park. In attempts to disperse the crowd of thousands, the police reportedly fired several rounds of tear gas and blank bullets before changing to live ammunition.

3. (U) Two people were reportedly shot. The hospital administration told polfsn that the two gunshot victims were treated yesterday. In stable condition, both patients have been released from the hospital. To post's knowledge, no AmCits were injured.

4. (SBU) Amid the confusion, the police tried to dismantle the speaker's platform, which the Coalition had paid the City Assembly approximately USD 50 to construct. Coalition leaders, however, sought and received a court injunction allowing the rally to take place. Later in the afternoon, on a partially dismantled platform, Coalition presidential candidate Gwanda Chakuamba addressed the remaining supporters.

COMMENT

5. (SBU) Malawian police have a history of heavy-handed crowd control, and it is almost exclusively wielded against opposition rallies and demonstrations. President Muluzi's decision to hold a simultaneous UDF rally in the vicinity of the Coalition's was reportedly a last-minute development. This was no coincidence, and we see a pattern appearing where the ruling UDF prevents opposition parties from holding public meetings through manipulating rally permits (mainly by re-scheduling its own rallies wherever and whenever the opposition plans to meet) and by heavy-handed police tactics. The police-inspired violence at the Mgwirizano Coalition's first major rally are signs of rising political tensions and an increasingly polarized society, and it bodes ill for the prospects of a peaceful campaign leading to the May 18 elections. END COMMENT.

BROWNING